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ABSTRACT

Debate is structured argumentation consisting of four elements: a resolution or proposition; an affirmative position, speaker, or team supporting the proposition; a negative position, speaker, or team responsible for attacking the proposition; and a judge or group of judges who determines which position has better achieved its purpose. Debate as a high school activity has the following aims: (1) to encourage in-depth research into the contemporary problems that society faces; (2) to encourage questioning to help individuals formulate and defend positions on issues of underlying values and major policies; (3) to develop social skills necessary to work with a colleague and compete against other high school students; (4) to help students develop the emotional maturity to win and lose graciously; (5) to introduce students to diverse people and regions of the country; (6) to develop the poise necessary to handle unexpected situations in front of unfamiliar audiences; (7) to develop skills of logical argument adequately supported by research; and (8) to encourage students to use spoken English in an increasingly sophisticated way for arguing effectively and persuasively. (SRT)

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NATIONAL FORENSIC LEAGUE
CONFERENCE ON THE CONDITION
OF HIGH SCHOOL DEBATE

August, 1985 Kansas City, Missouri

POGO THE 'POSSUM LIVES, OR
WE HAVE MET THE ENEMY, AND THEY STILL ARE US

A RESPONSE TO FRANA AND WALLMARK

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Some years ago, it was customary for affirmative teams to present definitions as part of their initial statements. Evolution brought affirmative teams to talk about "operational" definitions and then, generally, to abjure any definition. We who teach and judge debate know the frustration for all who participate in an exercise in argumentation where neither side quite understands the intent of the other. Perhaps the single greatest and most critical issue facing us in identifying the condition of high school debate is the determination of what we mean by the term "debate" and what we think others mean by it. Let there be no mistake: more problems arise because of assumed definitions than for any other reason. And when we as the teachers of the activity permit these unsupported assumptions, the fault is our own, not anyone else's.

Let me, then, propose this definition of debate, an operational definition, to be sure, but nevertheless a definition. Debate is structured argumentation consisting of four elements: a "resolution" or "proposition," the wording of which is agreed on in advance; an affirmative position, speaker, or team, responsible for supporting the "proposition," the composition of which and speaking times for which are agreed on in advance; a negative position, speaker, or team, responsible for attacking the "proposition," usually equivalent to the affirmative in composition and speaking times, but always agreed on in advance; and a judge or group of judges, whose nature has been agreed on in advance, whose responsibility it is to determine which position has better achieved its purpose. Put simply, in

any debate of any kind, there must be advance agreement about what is to be the subject of the arguments, about who is to take which side, and about what is to be the nature of the arbiter.

If we are able to agree on how to define the activity, we can proceed to the major burden of this paper: what should be the nature of the activity. I propose that debate is like any other competitive activity that high school students become involved in, whether as intellectually demanding as chess or as physically demanding as basketball. The pieces moved are words, not chessmen or balls, and the playing field is the mind of the judge rather than a board or a court. But just as in those activities, the goals of the youngsters and the goals of their teacher-coaches may be somewhat different. The players may have winning as their only -- or at least as their principal -- goal. The coaches are, or should be, interested in more. Debate as a high school activity has at least the following aims:

1. encourage research in depth into contemporary problems faced by society.

2. encourage questioning and probing to help individuals formulate and defend positions on issues of underlying values and major policies.

3. provide for the development of the social skills necessary to work with a colleague and to compete intensely yet civilly against other high school students.

4. help students develop the emotional maturity to handle winning and losing graciously.

5. introduce high school students to new people from backgrounds and origins different from their own and -- when possible -- to parts of the nation they have not previously had the opportunity to visit.

6. provide for the development of the poise necessary to handle unexpected situations in front of unfamiliar audiences.

7. help students learn to use logical development of argument appropriately supported by the fruits of the research done.

8. encourage students to use spoken English in an increasingly sophisticated way so as to communicate the argument effectively and persuasively.

But even if all participants in this conference were to stipulate to these goals, we would still find great divergence because at least some of the important terms in the aims are assumed understood when they are, really, not agreed upon. Perhaps the most critical of these disagreements would arise in a discussion of the final aim. Just what is persuasion? And how does it interact with communication? Probably few would deny that communication is more effective when the message understood by the receiver (the listener, in this case) approximates the message intended to be sent (by the speaker). Games like "telephone" provide an amusing but nonetheless reasonable suggestion that we can actually measure the degree to which the message sent approximates the message received. In fact, we can even devise a method to obtain a quotient that will represent the "efficiency" of any communication system. Persuasion, then, comes into play when the speaker, or sender of message, uses the message for the purpose of having the listener, or receiver of message, agree with the message. Jo-

seph Wenzel reminds us that even Aristotle's view of persuasion seems to have been normative when he wrote of ethos: "The orator persuades by moral character when his speech is delivered in such a manner as to render him worthy of confidence."[1] Debaters try to use persuasion to get the judge to agree with them and, further, to act by voting for them. Certainly, Mr. Wallmark is correct when he identifies persuasion as a basic part of debate. I think he stops regrettably short of a sufficient analysis when he chooses delivery as the only component of persuasion to be dealt with. He further limits the discussion by choosing speed as the only compenent of delivery. Posture, gesture, emphasis, pitch, and volume are all important components of delivery. And argument choice, organization, and word choice are all as important to persuasion as delivery.

Naturally, speed as one component of delivery can be excessive and, therefore, inappropriate. But since it is a part of delivery, why not teach its appropriate use? Mr. Wallmark is correct that not all debaters -- and especially not all high school debaters -- are of National Debate Tournament caliber. But we, as teachers of speech communication should teach all our students all aspects of delivery, and that includes, as Mr. Wallmark tells us, use of appropriate speed. After all, even those who participate in the National Debate Tournament, debaters, coaches, and judges alike, agree that uncontrolled speed should not be rewarded. Austin J. Freeley reports on a study he has conducted,

> "[I]t is clear that the community of NDT participants has arrived at a near unanimous consensus...which contains three elements: 1) debaters are justified in adapting to the maximum skill level of their judges, 2) incomprehensible arguments must be ignored, and 3) speaker points can be used to penalize objectionable delivery."[2]

Rather than complain that, too often, youngsters exceed their own limits, we can teach them to discover these limits and perhaps to extend them. Certainly every debater must know his own maximum efficiency rate, and the mechanics used to increase that rate are well within the purview of any coach. The Wallmark position that too often high school debaters try to speak more quickly than they can with clarity and more quickly than some judges can listen is, I believe, indisputable. His proposed solution is, however, probably unreasonable. It suggests that we take an activity that is all too often evaluated in the most subjective ways and provide one more opportunity for arbitrary response on the part of the judge. In any case, it is already generally agreed that no judge should count, or be expected to evaluate, an argument he cannot hear. And it makes no difference if he cannot hear it because the debater's volume is too low or speed too high. But the condition is <u>cannot</u> hear, not <u>will not</u> hear. The judge is, definitionally, part of the debate, and he cannot be permitted the luxury of passive observation. He must be an active receiver of message. And as Freeley's study suggests, present practices already provide the judge the opportunity to respond to such practices as the use of incomprehensible speed: ignore the argument and (except for the rare tournament that does not allow assignment of speaker points) deduct points from the rating.

The complaint that debaters tend to overuse evidence is, I am afraid, another invitation to increase the use of subjective standards. If Mr. Wallmark is making reference to the tendency to allow "cards" or quoted evidence to provide the analysis we expect the debaters to provide, I agree that the practice is disappointing. We have had too many examples of debat-

ers providing us with eight minutes of blurted label followed by incomprehensible card. But that is not quite the same as complaining about the amount of evidence if it is all appropriately used. In fact, many of us as coaches regularly encourage our students to use arguments supported by logical proof instead of ignoring them because they don't have the "card" that supports the argument. But too many of us, as judges, insist that the card be there. If logical analysis is not going to be rewarded by the judge, the youngsters will continue to shy away from it. The practice of reading every word on a brief is self-defeating and, thus, at least potentially self-correcting. If the evidence does not apply, then the person who has read it has wasted his own time, and his more clever opponent should point that out.

Alternatively, perhaps Mr. Wallmark is on the right track and merely stops short of meeting our needs. Perhaps we need to provide each judge the yellow and red cards carried by soccer referees. He might flash the yellow card as a warning that he is considering invoking the "ethical voting issue". The red card would be used to indicate the standard has been invoked; the decision is made; the debate is over. In that case, five people could be saved the additional frustration having the round continue.

But Mr. Wallmark provides his greatest service to the debate community, I believe, when he urges universal adoption of the practice of having judges inform debaters about their preferences and biases. If after that disclosure, and <u>if the judge is</u>, in fact, <u>consistent to his avowed position</u>, the debaters persist in ignoring advice, they deserve whatever ballot-carried retribution they get. But the condition of clear and complete information must be met. Adaptation is a goal most coaches agree upon for

high school debate, but the youngsters must be able to get a clear idea of what they are expected to adapt to. And the information should be equally available to both teams competing in a round. What seems to be increasingly clear is that there is great disagreement among judges about what goals the activity should foster and what should be the focus of any particular round. Even if we stipulate that all judges hold educational values to be of principal moment, we find ourselves concluding with Walter Ulrich, that

> "Any judge faces a problem of identifying what educational values debate should promote. Zarefsky is correct in arguing that there is no consensus within the community about which educational goal of debate is of the greatest importance. For some the goal of debate is to promote skills in communicating argument. Others will suggest that debate is important since it forces students to research one topic in depth and to develop analytical skills. Others will suggest that debate should promote creativity in debaters."[3]

The problem of the nature of the judge is already sufficiently complicated, it appears, that we should be looking toward more objective standards of judgment rather than setting up additional subjective standards. In fact, arbitrary judgments apparently unlinked to any standard are probably the single most frustrating element of debate to a significant number of participants. The subjective nature of the judgment is shown by Ulrich when he notes, "It is probably true that replacing one judge with another will change the outcome of many debate rounds..."[4]

Mr. Frana argues that contemporary debating style is most responsible for the disenchantment with the activity of former debaters and former debate coaches. Since he chooses a rather broad definition for style, I am forced to agree with the general conclusion but not with the specific. Most students who no longer debate seem to object to the time consumed and

the effort required. If these youngsters made the same decision about any varsity athletic activity, we would hardly conclude that the fault lay in the nature of the activity. Rather we would likely reason that the youngster involved had decided not to make the commitment necessary to excel in this activity and had chosen something else. Inherent in Mr. Frana's position is the conclusion that debate is or ought to be something like a series of public addresses, that anyone can or should be able to "jump in" and participate without effort or practice, that any member of the public should be able to evaluate a debate effectively. Probably most insidious of all the hidden assumptions is the notion that since we believe that everyone is entitled to an opinion, all opinions are equally valid. My experience with coaches who no longer support the activity is that a major factor in their disaffection is the arbitrary nature of decision-making by judges, the length of the competitive debate season, and the difficulty of handling those administrative matters that must be handled. The hours Mr. Frana writes of are critical to some, not only because of when they are -- principally on weekends -- but also because of how many there are. Certainly, unless we return to the practices of the last century and hold single interscholastic debates instead of the tournaments involving many schools, there is probably no way to change the problem of hours.

Mr. Frana and I differ initially on the nature of definition. If ours <u>is</u> an activity (and if style, the "way" it is done, is so important a part of the activity), then operational definitions are just what we should try to refine. It is no wonder that Mr. Frana regards the literal definitions of information processing as alarming, for they are intended to conjure up images of machines. We are talking about a human activity, and while it is possible to speak of artificial intelligence and machines duplicating hu-

manity, most of us probably find repugnant the concept of our emulating machines. Even replacing "data" with "information" does not provide enough comfort for us. Under the definitions provided, we would still have to regard ourselves as input/output devices even if we were not dealing exclusively with binary bits. Few of us, I suspect, are comfortable with so mechanistic a view of our universe. I say we differ initially on definition. Mr. Frana seems finally to come down on my side even though he offers a "working definition" rather than an "operational definition". I find this a distinction without a difference, but I am willing to accept his description and even stipulate to his definition. I am saddened, however, by his attempt to separate value debate from this definiton for three reasons. First, as I propose earlier, all debate should be limited by the same definition. Second, I am not alone in believing that thorough policy argumentation includes analysis of and argument about values. Finally, to argue that value debate is exempt from the intellectual rigors of acquiring information (facts) and learning to analyze and apply them is to excuse a laxity that we as teachers should guard against. I support the view that the intellectual goals of debate are among its most valuable. I am more comfortable, I regret, with Mr. Frana's general position than I am with his specific indictments.

1. I do not understand his complaint about generic disadvantages. If the disadvantage applies to the resolution as a whole, then must it not also apply to any example of the resolution the affirmative argues? This is certainly not an attempt to apply an argument to any topic and certainly seems to meet Mr. Frana's requirement for analysis in depth. Researching and constructing an argument that is truly generic represents, I should

think, the very best in information processing according to the stipulated definition. Besides, if the disadvantage is true for the resolution, why should any critic reject it out of hand without requiring affirmative response? Does this reflect a still more basic difference in approach to definition? Is the affirmative no longer required to support the resolution?

2. I don't believe it is possible to determine a claim to be "completely unreasonable", assuming logical and/or evidentiary support, in the absence of some refutation.

3. The inclusion of esthetics, while potentially pleasing, is rather sudden. What has this to do with information processing? There is, again, great potential for evil subjectivity here, for what is pleasing to one critic may be ugly to another. Providing a critic the opportunity to suggest he will recognize beauty when he sees it is to perpetuate the fuzziness of thought and acceptance of mediocrity inherent in the time-worn position: "I don't know why, but I know what I like." Certainly style has an esthetic component, but taste is necessary to evaluate that component. And neither can be asserted or allowed status without defense. A standard is needed, perhaps.

4. The matter of source citation is susceptible to a standard of rule (in NFL tournaments) or reason -- which I consider the more desirable -- (in others). There is, I believe, general agreement about just what constitutes an adequate source citation (author, qualifications, full title, date, and page number) even if there is less consensus on just how much of that needs to be presented in the speech.

5. Certainly clash, when it is absent, is sorely missed. I can-

not believe that any debater deliberately chooses not to clash directly when such clash is available as an option. There are times that that clash, however, may take unconventional forms. Is this a bad thing? Or is this objection just another wording for complaint at the use of generic negative argumentation. About a dozen years ago, I judged a very short debate, allegedly on the varsity level. The first negative constructive said: "Our coach has instructed us that if we have no evidence on an affirmative case, we should concede. So we concede." Is any of us unhappy that coach's tenure was very brief?

6. Mr. Frana's final objection seems an attempt to provide us a whipping boy. Prepackaged materials from any source is anathema to anyone who supports the value of original research and analysis. But the principal support for these seems to come from small debate programs located at some distance from large library systems who, principally because of the virtually unlimited scope of recent topics, are overwhelmed. And to indict "college students" is to indict our own former students who, if they reflect non- or anti-intellectual values as they work with high school students (as volunteers or as paid assistants or head coaches) condemn us as having failed to inculcate the better values inherent in the stipulated definition of information processing. It is, unfortunately, also to indict ourselves as unable or unwilling to use our not inconsiderable suasion with the youngsters we teach and guide.

If the condemned practices fail to train students, fail to encourage analysis and adaptation, fail to promote thinking, don't they also fail to provide a path to winning debate? Implicit in the entire argument is the concept of shortcut being taken to win. If these practices do not work,

can we not expect them to be culled? What seems to happen most frequently is that less successful or less experienced debaters try to imitate what they believe more successful or more experienced debaters do without fully understanding the process. While this is unfortunate and wasteful, it is natural. Debate is, clearly, no different from any other activity in which there is a fine line dividing the original, high quality work from the copy which has neither the quality nor, of course, the originality. Yet imitation and repetition are at the heart of the classical system of education which Mr. Frana praises. I do not think he can have this both ways.

In discussing the three major problems with which he says all programs are forced to deal, Mr. Frana suggests an examination of an area we have not yet discussed directly at this point. Both he and Mr. Wallmark explore the practices of the debaters, and Mr. Wallmark suggests an expansion of the judge's role. There is a need to examine the fourth element of debate as I defined it earlier, the proposition or what we debate about. We deal with Frana's three problems coherently rather than separately, and frequently the way we deal with them is affected by our response to the resolution. It is clear that those who propose problem areas and resolutions have some clear idea about what they want to see debated. But their thoughts and aims are hardly dispositive, as even Forensic Quarterly concedes that once the resolution is presented for debate, there is no official interpretation, and even interpretation is subject to debate in the round.[5] The framers of the resolution, in fact, cause many problems when they know what they mean but their language is ambiguous.

We generally think of a proposition of policy as having an agent and an action proposed. The wording can be more specific or less, and the more general it is, the more the research required (and the greater the infor-

mation explosion), the greater the demands upon debaters' time (and the greater likelihood of less desirable shortcuts), the more likely the dependence on generic argumentation, and the more the ineherent expense to the activity. In the coming year, for example, the wording chosen makes use of a broad agent (The federal government), and the action contemplated makes use of a verb (establish) whose definition -- even in context -- permits an incredibly wide interpretation of "action". As the rationale for the action, a term (to protect) was chosen that will even, arguably, subsume the present system as part of the resolution. Finally, the very term that tells us what we are debating about (quality of water in the United States) seems deliberately ambiguous. While there are legal and legislative definitions for "water quality", the wording committee has avoided the term.

Mr. Frana and Mr. Wallmark are concerned with what the student participant gains from debate as a high school activity. So am I. So are we all. I suspect we would not be here if that were not so. And I agree with their goals, generally, and even with many of their specific conclusions. If I find any fault, it is probably with the way they get to those conclusions. Mr. Wallmark wants to legislate a new judging criterion. Mr. Frana makes assumptions about desirability of practices and style that -- however popular they may be -- tend to limit the extent to which the activity can be used educationally. Ulrich sums this up well:

> "[T]he debate community should view matters of style as being debatable. We have long recognized that matters of substance are debatable, as well as matters of theory. By permitting terams faced with undersirable strategies to argue against those strategies we may help to stop abuses of the activity."6

This is, I believe, consistent with Mr. Frana's argument that judges should be, principally, critics of argument. Unfortunately, that position is the one which least allows such judge practices as deciding that generic arguments are illegitimate or that some unrefuted claims are "completely unreasonable".

It would be wrong to forget the point raised by Mr. Wallmark that much of the literature assumes a standard of debate that is beyond much of what we see in most high school debate rounds. Ulrich concedes this when he says that a high school novice debate round should not be judged by the same standards.[7] The problem still to be addressed, it seems to me, is how to be instructive enough without introducing the dogma that inevitably has to stifle information analysis and interesting, innovative argumentation. We can hope that conferences like this will add to the literature available specifically applicable to high school situations. For we must recognize that although the activity is the same by definition, the one-to-seven years' difference in age and sophistication between high school and college debaters, and the additional self- and squad-selection that limits membership in most college programs to students of much experience (if not talent), and the greater number of high school tournaments (at various levels) which result in a need for more judges on the high school level than on the college level all suggest that the problems of high school debate need to be further addressed more specifically.

That there are problems with high school debate is clear. What is less clear is just what the problems are. The National Forensic League is alarmed at the reduced participation in team debate, and this conference is the result of the conclusion that debate is in poor health in this country.

I believe, in fact, that participation in high school debate has increased in the past few years. What may have decreased is participation in NFL debate, and if that is so, the questions we ask in the future may have to be different ones from those we have adressed thus far. I fully support the propositions both presenters defend. Debate should contain all the elements mentioned in both. But we must be careful about underlying assumptions. It may be very appealing to decide that all that is wrong with our activity can be blamed on the influence of college debaters and/or on excessively high speed and over-dependence upon evidence cards and briefs. In fact, a majority of adults associated with high school debate may very well agree. But we who study history know well the dangers of the tyranny of the majority and the lengths a democratic society must go to, to protect against those dangers. We should avoid the temptation of thinking of debate as a spectator sport. It is not likely ever to become one, and unless the audience is the judge, debaters should never be required to modify their approach just to please spectators. They are not part of the equation or the interaction; they are not part of the definition of debate -- unless, again, they are the judges. Of greatest importance, we should avoid the temptation of concluding that whatever is wrong with debate can be corrected by new legislation. For increasing rules will only lead to testing circumventions and then ineluctably to the need for more legislation.

It is possible that restructuring or refocusing the activity is called for, but no individual and no individual group should take on the responsibility for mandating or establishing change. Conferences like this can be a valuable part of the process, but they can only <u>begin</u> the process.

Whether the matter is the wording of a resolution, the design or re-design of a ballot, the imposition of standards of ethics, the revision of the rules of the game, or the restructuring of the activity itself, the idea or suggestion must be explored, discussed, and debated. Opportunity for input must be encouraged from all interested parties. Committees of one cannot represent diverse viewpoints. They can write proposals, but they cannot conduct the dialectic necessary to refine them. And national or state executive boards cannot reasonably examine the proposals unless they consist of participants or coaches still actively involved. In fact, these boards most frequently -- at best -- can do little more than accept or reject whole proposals (very like debate judges), rather than modify them. And conferences like this may very well be representative of varying viewpoints, but the conferees have no constituents they can reasonably represent while advocating their viewpoints. Thus, without the time and opportunity for adequate discussion and debate, there can be no acceptable change for our activity. Anything short of the entire process involving proposal, general discussion, refinement, and debate before decision is a perversion of the values we claim to hold predominant in the use of debate as an activity in education. Whether we talk about "team" or "traditional" or "policy" debate, on the one hand, or Lincoln-Douglas debate, on the other, so long as it is to be debate, the temptation to resort to imperial ukases or the imposition of autocratic decrees, oligarchic rulings, or the untried inspirations of current favorites is a temptation to engage in all the shortcuts Mr. Frana finds evil. For as debaters so often argue, the process is key. Not only because it makes some people feel better at having meaningful input. But because it makes best use of the incredible

talents, brain power, and moral suasion available in this activity. To ignore it is wasteful. David Zarefsky tells us we are all too ready to sell short the potential for good we represent as a group.[8] And it is so. We can continue to be the enemy by looking for outside forces to blame, or we can be an alliance for all that is educationally good in our activity if we are willing to examine ourselves first.

NOTES

1. Joseph W. Wenzel, "Ethical Proof: A Reexamination of Aristotelian Theory," in Argument in Transition, Annandale, Virginia: 1983, Speech Communication Association, p 43.
2. Austin J. Freeley, "Judging Paradigms: The Impact of the Critic on Argument," in Dimensions of Argument, Annandale, Virginia: 1981, Speech Communication Association, p 436.
3. Walter Ulrich, "The Influence of the Judge on the Debate Round," in Argument in Transition, Annandale, Virginia: 1983, p 939.
4. Ulrich, "Ibid."
5. Richard E. Edwards, The Forensic Quarterly, 59:1, 1985, p iii.
6. Ulrich, p 941.
7. Ulrich, p 942.
8. David Zarefsky makes the argument in an unpublished memo of June, 1985.